

Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: *Plainsong*

Author: Kent Haruf

Family: Surname rhymes with “sheriff”; born February 24, 1943, in Pueblo, CO; son of Louis A. (a Methodist preacher) and Eleanor V. (a teacher and homemaker; maiden name, Shaver) Haruf; married Virginia K. Koon (divorced); married Cathy Dempsey; children: Sorel, Whitney, Chaney (daughters). **Education:** Nebraska Wesleyan University, B.A., 1965; University of Iowa, M.F.A., 1973. **Addresses:** Home: P.O. Box 1580, Salida, CO 81201. **Agent:** Peter Matson, Sterling Lord Literistic, 65 Bleecker St., New York, NY 10012.

Name: Kent Haruf

Born: February 24, 1943

Education: Nebraska Wesleyan University, B.A., 1965; University of Iowa, M.F.A., 1973.

Addresses: P.O. Box 1580, Salida, CO 81201.

Agent: Peter Matson, Sterling Lord Literistic, 65 Bleecker St., New York, NY 10012.



Career:

Worked odd jobs, including farm laborer, construction worker, rural paper route carrier, hospital orderly, railroad worker, librarian, and orphanage house parent; served in the Peace Corps in Turkey, 1965-67; taught high school English in Wisconsin and Colorado, 1976-86; Nebraska Wesleyan University, Lincoln, assistant professor, 1986-91; Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, associate professor, 1991-2000.

Awards:

PEN/Hemingway Foundation Special Citation, 1985; American Library Notable Books Award, 1985; Whiting Writer's Award, Mrs. Giles Whiting Foundation, 1986, for *The Tie That Binds*; Maria Thomas Award, 1991; National Book Award finalist in fiction, 1999, Mt. Plains Booksellers Award, 2000, *Salon.com* Award, 2000, Alex Award, 2000, *New Yorker* Fiction Award finalist, 2000, *Los Angeles Times* Fiction Award finalist, 2000, Book Sense Award finalist, 2000, 10th Colorado Evil Companions Literary Award, 2002, and OneBook-AZ 2003 award, nominated for the Dublin IMPAC 2001 Literary Award, all for *Plainsong*.

Writings: Novels

The Tie That Binds, Holt (New York, NY), 1984.

Where You Once Belonged, Summit Books (New York, NY), 1991.

Plainsong, Knopf (New York, NY), 1999.

Eventide, Knopf (New York, NY), 2004.

Also contributor of short stories to periodicals, including *Puerto del Sol*, *Grand Street*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *Gettysburg Review*. Stories have appeared in *Best American Short Stories*, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1987; and *Where Past Meets Present*, University of Colorado Press (Boulder, CO), 1994.

Media Adaptations:

Haruf's short story “Private Debts/Public Holdings” was adapted into a short film by Nancy Cooperstein for Chanticleer Films, 1987. CBS has acquired an option for TV rights to *Plainsong* and *The Tie That Binds*. *Plainsong* has been adapted for audio.



Author: Kent Haruf (2)

Sidelights:

The son of a Methodist minister, Kent Haruf was born and raised in the flatlands of northeastern Colorado, an environment that provides the background for his fiction. Haruf's career path to his long-time ambition of writing was a slow and convoluted one, involving attendance at several universities, a stint in the Peace Corps in Turkey (where he penned his first short stories), and numerous odd jobs, including being a janitor while he waited for the Iowa Writers Workshop to "take pity on him," as he told *Denver Post* interviewer Nancy Lofholm. After graduating from the prestigious University of Iowa Writers Workshop at the age of thirty, Haruf again worked construction and shelved library books in Colorado, then taught high-school English while he slowly developed his writing. He did not make his first appearance in print, a short story in a literary magazine, until eleven years later at the age of forty-one. That same year, 1984, his first novel was published. Speaking with John Blades of *Publishers Weekly*, Haruf described Holt, the fictional town that provides the setting for his novels, as his own "little postage stamp of native soil." Holt is a small Colorado farming community, close to the Kansas and Nebraska borders and more akin to the rural environments of those states than it is to cosmopolitan Denver to the west. Blades noted: "Along with its surrounding farms and homesteads, Holt has proved as fertile—and will perhaps be as inexhaustible—for Haruf's fiction as the apocryphal Yoknapatawpha County was for Faulkner's."

Haruf's first novel, *The Tie That Binds*, chronicles the long, hard life of Edith Goodnough, born near the turn of the twentieth century. Edith's story is told by Sanders Roscoe, the son of the man Edith loved but refused to marry, giving up her chance at happiness to care for a tyrannical crippled father. *The Tie That Binds* garnered Haruf several honors, including the 1986 Whiting Writer's Award. The novel was praised by critics as well; Ruth Doan MacDougall in the *Christian Science Monitor* observed that Haruf's "characters live, and the voice of his narrator reverberates after the last page: humorous, ironic, loving." Chris Wall in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* hailed *The Tie That Binds* as "an impressive, expertly crafted work of sensitivity and detail, absent the hokum that usually accompanies sad tales of simple women and their domineering fathers." Haruf also won accolades from Perry Glasser in the *New York Times Book Review*. The critic declared that the author's "work is rooted in a sense of place; his eye and ear are faithful to his subject." The novel brought him "a \$25,000 Whiting Award, a PEN/Hemingway citation, and a job teaching freshman composition at Nebraska Wesleyan," according to Blades.

Haruf followed *The Tie That Binds* with his 1991 work, *Where You Once Belonged*. This book centers on Jack Burdette, a villainous former high school football hero who manages to ruin many lives in his home town of Holt, Colorado. Narrating Jack's story is a man with a stake in the events, newspaper editor Pat Arbuckle. Richard Eder in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* offered a laudatory assessment of *Where You Once Belonged*, calling it "taut and deadly," and applauding the "disciplined economy" of "Haruf's writing." The critic concluded that the author's second novel is a "stirring and remarkable book." A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer called the book a "deeply affecting novel," and noted that "not a word is wasted in [Haruf's] brooding drama." A commentator for *Kirkus Reviews* observed that Haruf "does a beautiful job of capturing small-town life."

Haruf wrote his first two novels by conventional means. With his third he tried a radically different approach. Removing his glasses and placing a stocking cap (not wool) over his eyes, he typed his first draft blind on an old manual typewriter. Haruf's aim, as related by Blades, was "to achieve freshness and spontaneity without being distracted by the sight of words on the page." Haruf also told the *Boston Herald's* Rosemary Herbert, "Unlike the computer, which needs another command to make the work go on paper, the typewriter is more simple, direct. Something about the sound of the keys hitting makes an obvious connection between what you think and the results you get." The result was *Plainsong*, a novel subsequently lauded by critics even more highly than Haruf's earlier books. Even before its publication, *Plainsong* began drawing special attention. According to Daisy Maryles of *Publishers Weekly*, "Knopf's enthusiasm for [the novel] began last spring with the manuscript being passed around in-house; for a while, it was the most photocopied manuscript on Knopf's fall list." On the basis of editorial response to the book, a larger first printing was planned, along with increased publicity that included a twelve-city tour for Haruf.



Author: Kent Haruf (3)

Sidelights:

In the epigraph to *Plainsong*, Haruf states that the title of the book refers to the “simple and unadorned” vocal melodies, sometimes sung by alternating voices, that have been used in Christian churches for centuries. The novel tells the story of six major characters and several subsidiary ones, and like a plainsong, the action is related from alternating perspectives of different characters in different chapters. Once again the setting is Holt, Colorado, and its environs. The plot begins with three separate tales that ultimately intertwine. A pregnant teenager, Victoria Roubideaux, is kicked out of her home by her mother; a local high school history teacher, Tom Guthrie, is abandoned by his wife and left to raise his two young sons alone; and two elderly bachelor brothers, Harold and Raymond McPherson, have consigned themselves to an isolated existence on their cattle ranch miles from town. “Although the intersection of these three sets of lonely lives might normally have all the melodramatic makings of a provincial soap opera,” noted Michiko Kakutani in the *New York Times*, “Mr. Haruf orchestrates their convergence with such authority and grace that their stories materialize before the reader’s eyes without a shred of contrivance.”

Writing in a lean prose style that several reviewers compared to that of Hemingway, Haruf portrays the lives of his characters from the fall of one year through the spring of the next, often using images from the natural world and the changing seasons to complement the changes they experience. “A fugue upon weather and light plays throughout the novel,” observed Verlyn Klinkenborg in a glowing review of the novel for the *New York Times Book Review*, while Donna Seaman of *Booklist* commented: “Haruf’s narrative voice is spare and procedural, and his salt-of-the-earth characters are reticent almost to the point of mannerism until it becomes clear that their terseness is the result of profound shyness and an immensity of feeling. Haruf’s unforgettable tale is both emotionally complex and elemental, following, as it so gracefully does, the cycle of life, death, and rebirth.” *London Observer* critic, Selina Mills remarked, “Many American writers such as Cormac McCarthy have handled the subject of Midwest prairie towns and uncommunicative inhabitants before. Fiction, too, has often relied on musical form for narrative structure. Haruf, however, offers a fresh approach by creating layers, which intensify and deepen as the novel progresses, alternating between each character’s life at every chapter. Like the ‘unadorned melody’ in the book’s epigraph, the prose is simple and understated.” Christian Stayner for the *Christian Science Monitor* described the characters as “richly-written.” Although less overcome with the power of *Plainsong* than most reviewers, Robin Nesbitt of *Library Journal* nevertheless found it to be both “lyrical and well crafted” and a “tight narrative about how families can be made between folks who are not necessarily blood relatives [that] makes for enjoyable reading.”

Knopf’s confidence in *Plainsong* was justified when the novel became a National Book Award finalist and appeared on the *Publishers Weekly* best-seller lists, prompting further paperback reprints of Haruf’s earlier novels. Discussing with Blades his “sudden” success at the age of fifty-six, Haruf noted: “This country’s crazy in terms of fame and what people think it means. They expect a writer to be something between a Hollywood starlet and the village idiot. . . . Fame is very seductive and can be very dangerous if you’re trying to get your work done.” Lofholm quoted him on his success: “Haruf said writing has gotten more difficult: ‘Your standards change. You want to do something better than you’ve done before.’ He knows he’s succeeded when a *New York Times* review calls *Plainsong* ‘a novel foursquare, so delicate and lovely, that it has the power to exalt the reader.’ But Haruf said he really knows he’s made it when an eastern plains dairy farmer stabs his finger onto the cover of *A Tie That Binds* and says ‘now that is exactly right’.”

Author: Kent Haruf (4)

Further Reading About the Author:

Books:

Contemporary Literary Criticism, Volume 34, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1985.

Periodicals:

Arizona Republic (Phoenix, AZ), April 2, 2003, p. E1.

Atlanta Journal-Constitution, March 30, 2000, p. D2.

Austin American-Statesman, October 10, 1999, p. K6.

Booklist, August, 1999, Donna Seaman, review of *Plainsong*, p. 1986; January 1, 2000, p. 819; April 1, 2000, p. 1449.

Boston Herald, December 15, 2000, p. 051, interview.

Christian Science Monitor, December 7, 1984, p. B12; October 21, 1999, p. 13.

Denver Post, October 17, 2001, p. F-01.

Entertainment Weekly, November 5, 1999, Megan Harlan, "The Week," p. 76.

ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment, winter, 2003, p. 185.

Kirkus Reviews, November 15, 1989, pp. 1618-1619.

Library Journal, October 1, 1984, review of *The Tie That Binds*, p. 1861; January, 1990, Joseph Levandoski, review of *Where You Once Belonged*, p. 148; September 1, 1999, Robin Nesbitt, review of *Plainsong*, p. 232; July 2000, p. 162.

Los Angeles Times Book Review, January 27, 1985, p. 4; February 11, 1990, pp. 3, 7.

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, November 15, 1999, p. 1E.

News & Record (Piedmont Triad, NC), November 14, 1999, p. H5.

Newsweek, October 4, 1999, Jeff Giles, "The Heart of the Country," p. 67.

New York Review of Books, October 21, 1999, Joyce Carol Oates, "Wearing out the West," p. 30.

New York Times, October 8, 1999, pp. B45, E47; December 1, 1999, pp. B4, E1.

New York Times Book Review, January 6, 1985, Perry Glasser, review of *The Tie That Binds*, p. 16; October 3, 1999, p. 7.

Observer (London, England), May 14, 2000, p. 12.

Publishers Weekly, August 24, 1984, review of *The Tie That Binds*, p. 74; December 1, 1989, Sybil Steinberg, review of *Where You Once Belonged*, p. 47; August 2, 1999, review of *Plainsong*, p. 70; October 25, 1999, Daisy Maryles, "This Novel Just Sings," p. 19; November 1, 1999, review of *Plainsong*, pp. 46, 59, John Blades, "Kent Haruf: Home on the Plains," p. 59; February 7, 2000, p. 22; September 4, 2000, p. 24.

Rocky Mountain News (Denver, CO), February 27, 2000, p. 2E.

School Library Journal, June, 2000, p. 173.

Seattle Post-Intelligencer, November 8, 1999, p. E2.

Star-Ledger (Newark, NJ), December 12, 1999, p. 004.

Time, October 25, 1999, Elizabeth Gleick, review of *Plainsong*, p. 130.

Times (London, England), April 22, 2000, p. 22; April 28, 2001, p. 16.

Wall Street Journal, October 8, 1999, p. W10; October 11, 1999, p. B1.

Online:

January Magazine.com, <http://www.januarymagazine.com/> (November 1999), review of *Plainsong*.

PageOneLit.com, <http://www.pageonelit.com/> (March 9, 2004), interview with Haruf.

PeaceCorpsWriters.com, <http://www.peacecorpswriters.org/> (March 4, 2004), interview with Haruf.

Random House Web site, <http://www.randomhouse.com/> (March 9, 2004), interview with Haruf.*

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Thomson Gale, 2004.

Source Database: Contemporary Authors



Author: Kent Haruf (5)

Writings by the Author:

Books:

The Tie That Binds (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1984).

Where You Once Belonged (New York: Summit, 1990).

Plainsong (New York: Knopf, 1999).

Eventide (New York: Knopf, forthcoming 2004).

Produced Script:

Private Debts, motion picture, Chanticleer Films, 1989

Selected Periodical Publication: Uncollected Fiction

"Now (And Then)," *Puerto del Sol*, 17 (Summer 1982): 39-42.

"The Autopsy of Sam Adams," *Grand Street*, 5 (Spring 1986): 7-18.

"Private Debts/Public Holdings," *Grand Street*, 6 (Autumn 1986): 18-32.

"Dancing," *Prairie Schooner*, 66 (Summer 1992): 53-65.

"Inside T.O. Judy's Mouth," *Gettysburg Review*, 7 (Summer 1994): 483-495.

Selected Periodical Publication: Uncollected NonFiction

"To See Your Story Clearly, Start Pulling the Wool over Your Own Eyes," *New York Times*, 20 November 2000, p. E1.

"What We Did for Love," *More* (October 2001): 66-68.

About the Author:

Kent Haruf's novels relay the struggles of high-plains farmers and teachers, children and parents, husbands and wives, whose lives proceed along differing trajectories. Like William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County or Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio, Haruf's fictional Holt, Colorado, is a place where momentary kindnesses and abiding despair intersect in the lives of small-town people. Collectively, the stories of these people create a history that all the inhabitants of Holt share as they seek emotional connections to sustain them through long winters and years of hard work in this isolated region of northeast Colorado. In a profile published in the *Omaha World Herald* (19 December 1999), Haruf revealed that he has created a map of Holt in his mind and carefully located the homes, businesses, and even the water towers that mark the landscape of his fictional town. Holt is based in part on the real Colorado towns of Yuma, Wray, and Holyoke, where Haruf lived as a child; he says that Holt

seems like home to me. There seems to be plenty to write about there. . . . You know their family stories. You know the connections between people. You know how society works. You know whose pickup is parked in somebody's driveway where it doesn't belong, and you know whose dog is loose and whose bicycle is parked in front of the bakery. All those things are important to a writer.

The sudden and unexpected acclaim afforded Haruf's 1999 novel, *Plainsong*, belies the gradual and assiduous efforts of its author to tell the seemingly simple story of Holt.

Haruf was born Alan Kent Hoerauf in Pueblo, Colorado, on 24 February 1943. (The family name was changed in the 1940s by Haruf's father; Haruf's grandfather had immigrated to America from Germany in



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the 1880s and found that no one could pronounce Hoerauf.) Haruf is the son of Eleanor V. (Shaver) Haruf, a teacher, and Louis A. Haruf, a Methodist minister who moved his family to various small Colorado towns where the populations rarely exceeded two thousand people. Haruf spent his childhood riding his bicycle and exploring the countryside with his brother, sitting in church while his father preached, and reading avidly. Haruf's parents were book lovers and nurtured their son's desire to read. Storytelling was also part of family life; after dinner Haruf's father would recall tales of his childhood on a remote North Dakota homestead. In such family sessions, Haruf first heard stories of a place like Holt.

Haruf enrolled in Nebraska Wesleyan University, where he majored first in biology before discovering writers such as Ernest Hemingway and Faulkner. From the former, Haruf learned the power of a clear and direct prose style, while from the latter he discovered the value of stories set in a small town populated by hardworking people. After graduating in 1965 with a degree in English, Haruf spent two years in the Peace Corps teaching English to children in Turkey. He returned to the United States intent upon pursuing graduate studies in English. He entered the University of Kansas but left quickly, displeased with the way literature was taught. A conscientious objector to the Vietnam War, Haruf spent the next two years working in a hospital as an orderly and in an orphanage as a house parent in lieu of military service.

After one failed attempt to gain entrance into the prestigious Writers Workshop at the University of Iowa, Haruf was admitted in 1971. He was twenty-eight years old. Haruf's classmates at Iowa were such now notable authors as Tracy Kidder, Stuart Dybeck, T. Coraghessan Boyle, and Ron Hansen. In the *Omaha World Herald* profile, Hansen identified a difference between Haruf and his classmates: "He was a quiet, reserved, but friendly guy, and when he had something to say, it had resonance. He was older and seemed more assured about what he wanted to do as a writer." After graduating with an M.F.A. from Iowa in 1973, Haruf needed to support his growing family—he had married Virginia K. Koon in 1967 and had three daughters—so in 1974 he began teaching in an alternative high school in Madison, Wisconsin. In 1978 the Harufs moved back to Colorado. After several lean years working construction, Haruf earned a teaching certificate and began teaching English to farm kids in several rural schools, spending his summers writing what became his first novel, *The Tie That Binds* (1984).

In 1982, at the age of thirty-nine, Haruf published his first piece of fiction: a four-page, stylistically self-conscious story titled "Now (And Then)," in which the narrator recounts his mother's drive home from Wisconsin through Iowa. Shortly thereafter, John Irving, one of Haruf's teachers at Iowa, encouraged Haruf to contact his agent, John Matson, with the new novel, warning Haruf that Matson had rejected the past fifty authors Irving had sent to him. Matson, however, liked Haruf's novel and quickly found a publisher in Holt, Rinehart, and Winston. *The Tie That Binds* appeared in 1984.

In *The Tie That Binds* Haruf employs a circular narrative structure in which the narrator, Sanders Roscoe, tells the story of a woman, Edith Goodnough, who has been charged with murder and lies in the Holt hospital awaiting trial. Edith's situation is complex, though, and Roscoe feels compelled to tell her whole story because he knows that a reporter from the *Denver Post* has been collecting information for a story about Edith. Roscoe thinks the city reporter, foolishly wearing yellow pants to interview people living on a ranch, has no clear sense of either Edith or the town where she has lived for more than seventy years. Thus, after snubbing the reporter, Roscoe begins his story in the present but in the course of relaying events quickly retreats into the past. For Roscoe, in order to understand Edith Goodnough and the events that led to her current state, one has to begin back in 1895, when her parents, Roy and Ada Goodnough, got married and moved from Iowa to Holt. The past is not a distant abstraction for Roscoe but a series of events



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that both link him with the Goodnough family and cast light on Edith's recent transgressions. Events that impact the country as a whole are not ignored, but the real history Roscoe presents involves people whose lives are inseparably interconnected. Roscoe seems to have learned the importance of the small stories within a larger one from his father, whom he recalls saying, "Well, this is a piece of history that won't appear in no history books."

The story revolves around siblings Edith and Lyman Goodnough, their overbearing father, and the meager land they farm. Edith and Lyman's story is one of joyless forbearance as they suffer the rage and intolerance of their loveless father. Edith represents a recurring type of female character in Haruf's fiction—hardworking, enduring, and faithful, surviving on brief moments of affection and emotional connection. When Lyman, who is particularly persecuted by his father, has the chance to escape the farm, he does so with apparent detachment, leaving the sister who loves him and not returning home until twenty years later, well after his father's death. In the interim, Edith patiently braves the life given her, remembering the brief love affair she had with Roscoe's father and watching Roscoe grow into a man. Though not her biological child, Roscoe becomes a figurative son for her. The interaction between the aging woman and growing boy and then the old woman and adult narrator poignantly reveals Edith as a woman who has spent her life caring for an emotionally and physically crippled father while quietly observing the life and son she might have had.

Roscoe is in many ways a typical Haruf narrator: simple, direct, and scrupulous in his own sense of accuracy. To some extent, Roscoe resembles F. Scott Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* (1925): both men articulate a clear sense of right and wrong that springs from their middle-American roots; both participate from the periphery in the stories they tell; and both bring their own sense of morality to bear upon the events of the story. The similarities between Nick and Roscoe end there, for Roscoe is different from Nick in terms of reliability. In Haruf's novel Roscoe eagerly, if not longwindedly, distinguishes between what he knows with certainty because he witnessed it; what he believes happened based on long experience; and what he assumes happened based on speculation. For example, early in the novel when Roscoe explains why the sheriff, Bud Sealy, arrested Edith and then discussed her story with a reporter, Roscoe presents his version of events and adds: "But I can't say for sure that's how Bud was thinking. What I've suggested is based only on what I know about him after these fifty years of seeing and talking to him about once every week." That fifty years of experience qualifies Roscoe to explain why last month Edith burned down the Goodnough house with herself and Lyman still in it. Roscoe is willing to share what he knows with anyone willing to sit, wait, and listen to the entire story—just as long as he or she is not a reporter from the *Denver Post* wearing yellow pants.

The Tie That Binds received qualified but favorable reviews and quite a bit of critical acclaim. One critic for the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* (27 January 1985) referred to the novel as "an impressive, expertly crafted work of sensitivity and detail, absent the hokum that usually accompanies sad tales of simple women and their domineering fathers." A critic for *The New York Times Book Review* (6 January 1985) acknowledged Haruf's work as a "fine novel that dramatically and accurately explores the lives of people who work the land in the stark American Middle West." For Haruf, though, the greatest praise for his fiction came one evening at a party while he was visiting friends in Colorado. A farmer Haruf knew approached him and read aloud two paragraphs from the novel, about milking a cow whose tail is covered with a grotesque mixture of feces and afterbirth. Completing the passage, the farmer boldly proclaimed it exactly right. *The Tie That Binds* went into three paperback reprints and won the \$25,000 Whiting Writers' Award.



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The novel was a runner-up for the prestigious PEN/Hemingway Award for first fiction. On the strength of his first effort, Haruf secured a teaching position at Nebraska Wesleyan in 1986; he then began work on his second novel.

Where You Once Belonged (1990) began as two short stories published in *Grand Street* magazine in 1986. One of those stories, "Private Debts/Public Holdings," which eventually became chapter 8 of the novel, was reprinted in *Best American Short Stories* 1987 and made into a prizewinning motion picture (*Private Debts*, Chanticleer Films, 1989). *Where You Once Belonged* received good reviews but sold poorly. In the *Omaha World Herald* profile Haruf admits ambivalence over his second novel: "I was really in despair when I finished that book. I had three daughters by then, all in school, all hungry. I was teaching a lot, and I was under pressure to get it done. There are good things in it, but I wanted it to be better than it turned out to be." Despite Haruf's feelings about the novel, a reviewer for *The Los Angeles Times* (11 February 1990) regarded the final product positively: "Haruf's writing has a disciplined economy that sets off its power. Each phrase is spare and straightforward, yet out of all of them together . . . an extraordinary poetry emerges."

Where You Once Belonged employs the same narrative technique as *The Tie That Binds*. Beginning in the present with the return of a local hero turned thief, Jack Burdette, the novel then retraces Burdette's steps, from his childhood in Holt to his flight from town and his eventual return to terrorize the town once again. Burdette takes advantage of the goodness and vulnerability of others and thus brings out the worst in them. The novel explores the frustration of people whose faith in a hero is shattered and who then have no just outlet for their anger over that loss of faith. For many in Holt, their anger at Burdette festers or finds inappropriate outlet until Burdette returns to town and the story of *Where You Once Belonged* begins.

Everything comes too easily for Jack Burdette. A high-school sports hero, Burdette finds that he can rely on the tolerance and praise of the townspeople and the loyalty and love of a local beauty. All changes when Burdette and the narrator, Pat Arbuckle, go off to the University of Colorado in Boulder. Arbuckle studies journalism to pursue a career in the family business—the local newspaper, the *Holt Mercury*. Burdette, on full athletic scholarship, treats the university much in the way he treated everything in Holt, with callow indifference. Burdette neither shines athletically nor succeeds academically: he is not the largest or fastest athlete on the team, and without his girlfriend, Wanda Jo Evans, to complete his homework, Burdette cannot pass his courses. Eventually, on the verge of failing out of school, Burdette is expelled for stealing, an event that leaves him nonplussed and foreshadows behavior that will alter Holt's perception of the local hero forever.

Like Roscoe, Pat Arbuckle presents the facts of Burdette's easy success and eventual disgrace in a manner that weaves together the stories of many Holt citizens. While Roscoe was preoccupied with telling the story correctly because of his love for Edith Goodnough, Arbuckle is a journalist whose father taught him the value of listening to every version of an event without assuming any one of them is flawlessly accurate. Thus, Arbuckle carefully tells the story of Burdette's betrayal and its impact on the citizens of Holt. Like the story told by Roscoe in *The Tie That Binds*, Arbuckle's large story includes many smaller stories. Like Roscoe, Arbuckle is involved in the story, because Arbuckle loves the woman abused and rejected by Burdette, whose fate he is powerless to alter.

Haruf creates characters in *Where You Once Belonged* who echo characters from *The Tie That Binds*



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and foreshadow characters in *Plainsong*. Nora, Arbuckle's quiet and distant wife, is a character who psychologically recoils in the isolated and unrefined world of Holt. Like Lyman Goodnough in *The Tie That Binds* and Ella Guthrie in *Plainsong*, Nora finds no life and no story of her own amid the stories of Holt. She, like Lyman and Ella, must leave Holt in order to survive and have any hope of happiness. Their stories lie elsewhere. Conversely, Haruf populates his novels with strong women who persevere even in the most hostile situations, adapting to their circumstances and accommodating others in their lives. For instance, Jessie Burdette suffers her husband's abuse and faces the misdirected hostility of Holt's citizens when Burdette skips town after embezzling money from the grain elevator. Maggie Jones in *Plainsong* cares for her ailing and senile father, takes in the pregnant Victoria Roubideaux, and waits for Tom Guthrie to recognize her for the good woman she is. In turn, Victoria Roubideaux is a younger version of these women, making mistakes early in her life from which she suffers the consequences, emerging stronger, wiser, and experienced enough to perceive the good in those around her.

The principal male characters in all three novels resemble one another: Roscoe, Arbuckle, and Guthrie struggle to maintain a sense of equilibrium and honesty in the face of dishonesty and ruthlessness in others. Each has a wife or mother from whom he feels estranged; each, in turn, finds companionship and love, if only fleetingly enjoyed, in the arms of another woman. Each knows he does not deserve the good woman he finds; as Guthrie admonishes his own image in the mirror, "You don't deserve it [Maggie Jones's love]," he said aloud. 'Don't ever even begin to think that you do.'"

In 1991, shortly after publishing his second novel, Haruf accepted a faculty position at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, where he could teach fiction workshops and work with students in a growing M.F.A. program. After his first marriage ended in divorce, Haruf married Catherine S. Dempsey in 1995. The lightened teaching load at Southern Illinois gave Haruf the opportunity to work on the novel that moved him from a solid "mid-list" author to a best-selling one. In 1999 Haruf published *Plainsong*, which won early praise from independent booksellers. Word-of-mouth recommendations spread until Haruf found himself on *The New York Times* best-seller list and shortlisted for the National Book Award. *Plainsong* went on to win the Regional Book Award in fiction from the Mountain and Plains Booksellers Association; a *Salon.com* Book Award; the American Booksellers Book Award; and awards from *The New Yorker* and *The Los Angeles Times*.

Readers and reviewers responded approvingly to Haruf's direct, plainspoken narrative and his story of people surviving adversity. Haruf eschews quotation marks throughout the novel, which underscores the connection between what the characters think and what they say. While many of the traits reviewers championed in *Plainsong* were present in his earlier novels, *Plainsong* represents a clear departure for Haruf.

In his first two novels, Haruf's first-person narrator begins with an event in the present and explores relevant past events leading back to the present. In contrast, the third-person narrative of *Plainsong* follows a linear development. An impending sense of anticipation and trepidation recurs throughout the early chapters as the central characters begin their daily routines. The novel then charts the lives of its characters over a nine-month period from early fall until late spring. The past is less relevant in *Plainsong* than in Haruf's earlier novels. The reader learns little about the past lives of Tom Guthrie, Victoria Roubideaux, and the McPheron brothers. The reader never learns why Guthrie's wife, Ella, has retreated into an isolated and lonely world, why she moves out of the house, or why she moves to Denver to live with her sister. Rather than explain in detail why a single event occurred, as he does in *The Tie That Binds* and



Author: Kent Haruf (10)

About the Author: (Continued)

Where You Once Belonged, Haruf reveals little more than what happens to each character in *Plainsong*. The structure of *Plainsong* complements its narrative. The central characters' stories are told in recurring self-titled chapters, intersecting occasionally as characters interact with one another. The novel revolves around the lives of Tom Guthrie; elderly farmers Raymond and Harold McPherson; Victoria Roubideaux; and Guthrie's sons, nine-year-old Bobby and ten-year-old Ike. Guthrie's story is told in eight chapters scattered through the novel, the McPherson brothers' in nine chapters, Victoria's in twelve, and Ike and Bobby's likewise in twelve. These stories constitute forty-one of the forty-four chapters. Of the remaining three chapters, one presents Ella Guthrie's life of lonely detachment from her husband and children. Later in the novel, the chapter titled "Maggie Jones" reveals a strong and determined woman for whom things just may be looking up. The psychologically downward trajectory of Ella's life in contrast to the potentially upward direction of Maggie's life denotes not turning points in a plot but coincidental contrasts in two women's lives. These two women represent recurring types of female characters in Haruf's fiction—one who suffers from a life on the plains and one who perseveres.

In the final chapter, titled simply "Holt," the key characters meet at the McPherson ranch on a peaceful May evening. In contrast to its beginning, the novel ends with a sense of contentment as the characters watch the setting sun and await dinner. Although the birth of Victoria's baby suggests the joyful prospects of a new life, the novel does not proffer a resolution to all conflicts: Guthrie still faces problems with his student Russell Beckman; Guthrie and Maggie's budding romance is far from guaranteed; and Victoria faces the challenge of being a teenage single mother without a high-school diploma.

Throughout his fiction, but particularly in *Plainsong*, Haruf explores the way communities are formed outside traditional societal institutions. Despite his father's calling as a minister, Haruf does not present the church as the focal point in his characters' lives nor as the place where lasting bonds are formed. Rather, community bonds are formed in Haruf's fiction naturally by people willing to connect with others and give of themselves. At times, this bond is a natural one, such as a father's love for his sons, a mother's love for her unborn child, or the alliance between siblings. Most others, though, occur in unexpected ways among unlikely people. For example, the McPherson brothers are willing to help Victoria, a girl they do not know, and take her in again after she indifferently casts off their friendship. Ike and Bobby find themselves unwittingly attached to Iva Stearns, an elderly woman who becomes something of a surrogate grandmother to them; but her sudden death stuns the boys. Unable to verbalize the inexplicable sense of loss they feel over Stearns's death, the two silently ride their horse to the ranch of their older counterparts, Raymond and Harold McPherson, seeking solace.

The critical praise for Haruf's third novel centered on the author's style of storytelling. A critic for *The New York Times Book Review* (3 October 1999) articulated what most reviewers believed:

It is the triumph of *Plainsong* that here [the final chapter], where the novel turns and the reader might have felt the author's hands clutching his lapels, you feel instead the McPhersons' self-knowledge—their plain intent to change without knowing why—passes effortlessly into your own self-knowledge. You are convinced that if there really were a Holt, Colo., this is how things would be in that town, truant and forgiving at the same time. The tide of judgment has washed away here, leaving a world that is only what it is, with lives to be made or squandered as they will.

Author: Kent Haruf (11)

About the Author: (Continued)

Despite such praise for the empathic connection between reader and character, Haruf's fiction never presents an idealized vision of the world or a mythic connection between the individual and the land.

Haruf's fiction often involves the sense of community that links people both to each other and to the land; these communal bonds hold despite the many disappointments and accommodations exacted on the individual. Haruf's stories are not the stories of people inspired by a myth of progress and exploration, of the heroic dream of taming a wild frontier. These stories are the offspring and grandchildren of people who dreamed those large dreams. Both an attraction to and a repulsion from the land recur in Haruf's characters. People are transformed by the land they work and the space they occupy rather than the other way around. Any promise of material wealth, social advancement, or spiritual rejuvenation that may have motivated the ancestors of Haruf's characters lingers only as a dimly remembered dream annulled. Many of Haruf's characters oscillate merely between work and rage or work and drink. Even the houses in which Haruf's characters live do not offer a sense of solace or refuge from the world but rather instill a sense of psychological entrapment. At its best, the house is a place where objects of practical use stand ready for service while objects that recall past happiness haunt closed rooms or closets. At times, the house seemingly constricts the lives of its occupants. In contrast to the vast plains and infinite sky, the house, particularly for females, draws its occupants into a sense of isolation from the world outside. In the case of Edith Goodnough, the house eventually becomes the tomb that inters Lyman and nearly inters her.

Plainsong was made into a television movie by Hallmark Hall of Fame Productions, with screenplay by Oliver Goldstick; it is scheduled to air on CBS in May 2004 and stars Aidan Quinn and Rachel Griffiths. Haruf's next novel, *Eventide*, is also scheduled for publication by Knopf in 2004. Like *Plainsong*, the novel is set in Holt and shifts among three sets of characters in a third-person narrative that spans nine months. Characters such as Victoria Roubideaux and the McPheron brothers recur in the novel, though the story is darker than that of *Plainsong*.

Like the fiction of Douglas Unger, James Welch, Patricia Henley, Craig Lesley, William Kittredge, Louise Erdrich, and David Quammen, the novels of Kent Haruf do not tell the story of heroic idealism on the American plains but rather reveal the isolated acts of kindness, love, loyalty, betrayal, and desperation defining the lives of those whose ambivalent affection for the land is won at great cost and with even greater labor. This hard-won sense of place that comes to characters in Haruf's fiction is summed up by Sanders Roscoe: "Course it's not fair. There ain't none of it that's fair. Life ain't. And all our thinking it should be don't seem to make one simple damn." Nonetheless, Roscoe stays true to Edith and conceives his life bound up in hers and with the lives of others who live in Holt, Colorado.

Further Readings about the Author:

Interviews:

- Hillel Italie, "Author's Rural Story Causing a Buzz in Book Circles: Murphysboro Writer Harks Back to Colorado Childhood and Strikes a Chord," *Peoria Journal Star*, 31 October 1999, p. B7.
- John Mark Eberhart, "Simple and Plainsong: Kent Haruf Wanted His Celebrated Book to Capture Quiet but Real Lives without the Quote Marks," *Kansas City Star*, 19 August 2000, p. E1.
- Michael McGregor, "An Interview with Kent Haruf," *Writer's Chronicle*, 33 (March/April 2001): 38-45.



Author: Kent Haruf (12)

About the Author: (Continued)

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Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Miller II, and Charles E. Rankin, *Trails: Toward a New Western History* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1991).

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About this Essay:

Michael R. Molino, Southern Illinois University.

Sources:

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Source Database:

Dictionary of Literary Biography



Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: *Plainsong*

About This Guide: From www.randomhouse.com/vintage/read/plainsong/

The questions, discussion topics, and suggested reading list that follow are intended to enhance your group's reading of Kent Haruf's *Plainsong*. We hope they will provide you with new angles from which to approach and discuss this powerful tale of seven lonely lives set on the stark but beautiful High Plains of Colorado.

In the small town of Holt, Tom Guthrie, a high school teacher, fights to keep his life together and to raise his two boys after their depressed mother first retreats into her bedroom, and then moves away to her sister's house. The boys, not yet adolescents, struggle to make sense of adult behavior and their mother's apparent abandonment. A pregnant teenage girl, kicked out by her mother and rejected by the father of her child, searches for a secure place in the world. And far out in the country, two elderly bachelor brothers work the family farm as they have their entire lives, all but isolated from life beyond their own community.

From these separate strands emerges a vision of life—and of the community and landscape that bind them together—that is both luminous and enduring. *Plainsong* is a story of the abandonment, grief, and stoicism that bring these people together, and it is a story of the kindness, hope, and dignity that redeem their lives. Utterly true to the rhythms and patterns of life, *Plainsong* is an American classic: a novel to care about, believe in, and learn from.

For Discussion:

Why might Kent Haruf have chosen *Plainsong* as the title for this novel? What meaning, or meanings, does the title have in relation to Haruf's story and characters?

How does Haruf characterize the landscape of Holt and its surroundings, and how does he use landscape to set the emotional scene? In what ways are his characters shaped and formed by the land around them?

Few hints are given in the novel about what life might have been like for the Guthrie family before Ella left. What do you imagine that life to have been like? What sort of a marriage did Tom and Ella have, and what made it go wrong? What might account for Ella's nearly total withdrawal even from the children she seems to love?

How do the three teenagers having sex in the abandoned house inform and affect Ike and Bobby? What does this sight tell them about sex? About love? About the relationships and power struggle between men and women?

Do you believe there are marked differences between Raymond and Harold McPherson? If so, what are they?

Why do you think the McPherson brothers have chosen to spend their lives together rather than start families of their own? Are they lonely or unhappy before Victoria's arrival, or do they feel sufficient in themselves? What does Maggie mean when she tells them, "This is your chance" [p. 110]?

What parallels can you draw between the McPherson brothers and the young Guthrie boys? Why is the relationship so close in each case? What sort of a future do you see for the Guthrie boys? Do you think they will marry and have families?

The McPherson brothers think they know nothing about young girls. Is that the case? Has their solitary life close to the earth handicapped them so far as human relations go, or has it, in fact, provided them with hidden advantages?



Book: Plain song

For Discussion: (Continued)

What examples of parents abandoning children—either by desertion, emotional withdrawal, or death—can be found in this novel? What do these incidents have in common? How does abandonment affect children, and how does it shape their lives and relationships?

It is usually women who are portrayed as nurturers, but in this novel, men—Tom Guthrie and the McPherson brothers—provide shelter and comfort. How do men differ from women in this respect? What do these men offer that a woman might not be able to?

“These are crazy times,” Maggie Jones says. “I sometimes believe these must be the craziest times ever” [p. 124]. What does she mean by this? In what way are our times “crazier” than earlier eras? How does such “craziness” affect the lives of young people such as Victoria, Ike, and Bobby?

What motives and feelings might have driven Tom to sleep with Judy when it was really Maggie he was interested in? Why might Maggie have seemed momentarily frightening or intimidating to him?

Why do the Guthrie boys befriend Iva Stearns? What are they looking for in this tentative friendship? Do they find what they are seeking?

Why do the Guthrie boys go to the McPherson brothers after Iva's death rather than to someone closer to home, like their father or Maggie? Is there any indication that they connect Iva's death with their mother's abandonment? Why do they place their mother's bracelet on the train tracks, then bury it?

The inhabitants of Holt and its surroundings are extremely laconic: they speak only sparingly, as though they mistrust words. What might cause this? In what way does it affect the characters' relationships with one another?

How would you describe Holt, Colorado? What are its limitations, its disadvantages, and what are its strengths? In what ways is it typical of any American small town, and in what ways is it different? What help does it provide for people who need healing, like the characters in this book?

Plain song depicts some unusual “family” groups. How might Kent Haruf define family?

For General Discussion of Kent Haruf's Works:

How does Kent Haruf's writing style change from his first novel to his last, the National Book Award finalist *Plain song*?

What is the effect of Haruf's style in each and use of language on the reader?

How does the small town of Holt figure as a character in each novel?

How are the characters in each of the novels completely believable and different?

How does Haruf repeat some character traits in his novels and to what effect?

How do the characters and the image of the town change from book to book?



Book: Plainsong

Also by Kent Haruf, available in paperback from Vintage Contemporaries:

"An impressive, expertly crafted work of sensitivity and detail. Powerful." —*Los Angeles Times Book Review*

In his critically acclaimed first novel *The Tie That Binds*, Kent Haruf delivers the sweeping tale of Edith, a daughter of the American High Plains, as told by her neighbor, Sanders Roscoe. As Roscoe shares what he knows, Edith's tragedies unfold: a childhood of pre-dawn chores, a mother's death, a violence that leaves a father dependent on his children, forever enraged. Here is the story of a woman who sacrifices her happiness in the name of family obligation—and then, in one gesture, reclaims her freedom. *The Tie That Binds* is a powerfully eloquent tribute to the arduous demands of days gone by, and of the tenacity of the human spirit.

Where You Once Belonged:

"A beautifully told parable—simple and stark and true." —*Newsday*

In *Where You Once Belonged* Kent Haruf tells of a small town hero who is dealt an enviable hand and cheats with all the cards. Burdette is a high school football star who wins the heart of the loveliest girl in the county and the admiration of men twice his age. Fun loving and independent, Burdette engages in the occasional prank. But when the boy turns into a man, his high jinks turn into crimes—with unspeakable consequences. Now, eight years later, Burdette has returned to commit his greatest trespass of all. And the good people of Holt County may not be able to stop him. Deftly plotted, defiantly honest, *Where You Once Belonged* sings the song of a wounded prairie community in a narrative with the earmarks of a modern American classic.

Suggestions for Further Reading:

Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*

Willa Cather, *My Ántonia*

William Faulkner, *Sanctuary, The Sound and the Fury*

Charles Frazier, *Cold Mountain*

David Guterson, *Snow Falling on Cedars*

Ernest Hemingway, *In Our Time*

Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

William Maxwell, *So Long, See You Tomorrow*

Cormac McCarthy, *The Border Trilogy*

Carson McCullers, *The Ballad of the Sad Café, The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*

Rohinton Mistry, *A Fine Balance*

William Styron, *Lie Down in Darkness*

Anne Tyler, *The Accidental Tourist, Ladder of Years*

Eudora Welty, *The Golden Apples, The Optimist's Daughter*



Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: Plainsong

Reviews:

Booklist Review: It's a good thing young Ike and Bobby Guthrie are close, because they're in for a spell of loss and radical change. Victoria Roubideaux, 17, is too, but she has no sibling to stand beside her during bouts of morning sickness, or when her mother throws her out of the house. Haruf, author of *The Tie That Binds* (1984), alternates between the Guthrie boys' adventures and Vicky's quest to find a safe place for herself and her baby, but the two story lines soon entwine because all lives converge in the small Colorado town of Holt, which he so adroitly portrays. The Guthrie boys are often on their own after their mother leaves, while their nearly overwhelmed father, Tom, a high-school teacher, is distracted by the threats of a violent student. Vicky goes to Maggie Jones, a colleague of Tom's, for help. Unable to provide her with the sanctuary she needs, Maggie delivers Vicky to the elderly McPheron brothers, farmers as tightly connected as Tom's sons. Vicky revolutionizes their staid lives, and they provide her with her first true home, and the resulting familial love seems to set the entire countryside aglow. Haruf's narrative voice is spare and procedural, and his salt-of-the-earth characters are reticent almost to the point of mannerism until it becomes clear that their terseness is the result of profound shyness and an immensity of feeling. Haruf's unforgettable tale is both emotionally complex and elemental, following, as it so gracefully does, the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. ((Reviewed August 1999)) — Donna Seaman

School Library Journal Review: YA-This saga of seven residents of Holt, CO, details the problems they face and how they come together to solve them. Their divergent stories begin with Tom Guthrie, a high school teacher whose wife suffers a breakdown and abandons him and their two young sons. The Guthrie boys are often on their own while their stressed-out father struggles to keep the family together. Next are Victoria Roubideaux, 17 years old, alone, and pregnant; and Harold and Raymond McPheron, two elderly brothers who know nothing about "real life" outside their farm. It is Maggie Jones, Tom's colleague, who provides him with solace and brings resolution to these many dilemmas. Maggie talks the McPheron brothers into taking the pregnant teenager in, even though they have some reservations about this arrangement. Victoria and the two lonely men adjust to one another and form a family unit that none of them has known before. The characters tell their stories in alternating chapters. All of them are struggling but it is their caring, kindness, and forgiving spirits that help them support one another. There is a keen sense of place here—a place where family and community matter. YAs can learn from this novel about nontraditional families, about small towns where everybody knows everybody else's business, and about the power of love.—Carol Clark, formerly at Fairfax County Public Schools, VA Copyright 2000 Cahners Business Information.

Publishers Weekly Review: In the same way that the plains define the American landscape, small-town life in the heartlands is a quintessentially American experience. Holt, Colo., a tiny prairie community near Denver, is both the setting for and the psychological matrix of Haruf's beautifully executed new novel. Alternating chapters focus on eight compassionately imagined characters whose lives undergo radical change during the course of one year. High school teacher Tom Guthrie's depressed wife moves out of their house, leaving him to care for their young sons. Ike, 10, and Bobby, nine, are polite, sensitive boys who mature as they observe the puzzling behavior of adults they love. At school, Guthrie must deal with a vicious student bully whose violent behavior eventually menaces Ike and Bobby, in a scene that will leave readers with palpitating hearts. Meanwhile, pregnant teenager Victoria Roubideaux, evicted by her mother, seeks help from kindhearted, pragmatic teacher Maggie Jones, who convinces the elderly McPheron brothers, Raymond and Harold, to let Victoria live with them in their old farmhouse. After many decades of bachelor existence, these gruff, unpolished cattle farmers must relearn the art of conversation when Victoria enters their lives. The touching humor of their awkward interaction endows the story with a heartwarming dimensionality. Haruf's (*The Tie That Binds*) descriptions of rural existence are a



Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: Plainsong

Reviews:

richly nuanced mixture of stark details and poetic evocations of the natural world. Weather and landscape are integral to tone and mood, serving as backdrop to every scene. His plain, Hemingwayesque prose takes flight in lyrical descriptions of sunsets and birdsong, and condenses to the matter-of-fact in describing the routines of animal husbandry. In one scene, a rancher's ungloved hand repeatedly reaches though fecal matter to check cows for pregnancy; in another, readers follow the step-by-step procedure of an autopsy on a horse. Walking a tightrope of restrained design, Haruf steers clear of sentimentality and melodrama while constructing a taut narrative in which revelations of character and rising emotional tensions are held in perfect balance. This is a compelling story of grief, bereavement, loneliness and anger, but also of kindness, benevolence, love and the making of a strange new family. In depicting the stalwart courage of decent, troubled people going on with their lives, Haruf's quietly eloquent account illumines the possibilities of grace. Agent, Peter Matson. 75,000 copy first printing; 12-city author tour. (Oct.) Copyright 1999 Cahners Business Information.

Library Journal Review: Two bachelor farmer brothers, a pregnant high school girl, two young brothers, and two devoted high school teachers—this is the interesting group of people, some related by blood but most not, featured in the award-winning Haruf's touching new novel. Set in the plains of Colorado, east of Denver, the novel comprises several story lines that flow into one. Tom Guthrie, a high school history teacher, is having problems with his wife and with an unruly student at school—problems that affect his young sons, Ike and Bob, as well. Meanwhile, the pregnant Victoria Roubideaux has been abandoned by her family. With the assistance of another teacher, Maggie Jones, she finds refuge with the McPheron brothers—who seem to know more about cows than people. Lyrical and well crafted, the tight narrative about how families can be made between folks who are not necessarily blood relatives makes for enjoyable reading. Highly recommended for public libraries. [Previewed in Prepub Alert, LJ 6/1/99.]—Robin Nesbitt, Columbus Metropolitan Lib., OH Copyright 1999 Cahners Business Information.



Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: *Plainsong*

Salon.com Reviewed by Maria Russo:

Oct. 18, 1999 | Reading Kent Haruf's new novel is like being in an expertly piloted small plane, finding yourself flying low and smooth over the suddenly wondrous world below. "Plainsong" (which was recently nominated for a National Book Award) lays out a year in the life of Holt, an unremarkable small town in the High Plains east of Denver. The cast includes a high school history teacher who stands up to ominous pressure to pass a failing student; two small boys whose mother is gradually disappearing into depression; a shy 17-year-old girl whose mother has found out she's pregnant and kicked her out; and two grizzled bachelor brothers whose life revolves around their cattle. These characters are as varied as they come, and yet in alternating chapters Haruf tells each of their stories with the same steady, unstrained rhythm and generous, unflinching tone, so that the unexpected intersections of his character's lives come to seem not just interesting but deeply, reassuringly right.

Tom Guthrie, the history teacher, is caring for his 9- and 10-year-old sons as his tormented wife becomes less and less able to function; she finally moves out of their lives permanently. Guthrie is the laconic moral center of the novel. He's by no means faultless or conventionally virtuous, yet the quiet dignity of his small daily acts reverberates in Haruf's understated sentences:

Guthrie brought two thick crockery plates of steaming eggs and buttered toast to the table and set them down and the boys spread jelly on the toast and began to eat at once, automatically, chewing, leaning forward over their plates. He carried two glasses of milk to the table.

He stood over the table watching them eat. I have to go to school early this morning, he said. I'll be leaving in a minute.

As Guthrie's sons, Ike and Bobby, bike through town on their paper routes or spy on teenagers at an abandoned house, we get a boys'-eye view of Holt that reminds us how much children witness when they're out of eyeshot: sex and violence and even death. Haruf is equally perceptive when he turns his attention to Victoria Roubideaux, whose unexpected pregnancy shows her how alone she is. He never asks us to pity her, and we come to admire the graceful doggedness she brings to a seemingly impossible situation. She's got enough sense to ask for help from the right people. For Maggie Jones, one of her teachers, to hook her up with the McPherson brothers, two lonely, bighearted old-timers short on social skills, is a potentially corny "solution," but Haruf makes it work by showing us the uncomfortableness of the arrangement and letting it play itself out slowly.

You could quibble with the quiet, almost ingenuous triumphalism that pokes through the novel. Troublesome figures, such as Guthrie's wife or the abusive father of Victoria's baby, simply go away. In real life, the people you don't want to deal with hardly ever disappear; they hardly ever willingly forfeit their stake in the things you care about. The trick is figuring out how to share the earth with them.

The novel's brief, celebratory conclusion might have been even more effective if it had included one or two disagreeable people. But Haruf is not naive about human nature; he doesn't look away from violence, and he has a keen eye for the devastatingly casual acts of cruelty that punctuate daily life. He's simply convinced that decency is ultimately its own reward, and it's this optimism, along with the quiet sophistication of his technique, that allows him to look into the hearts of his characters while still respecting their privacy.

salon.com | Oct. 18, 1999



Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on:
Plainsong

Salon.com Reviewed by Maria Russo: